Literary Analysis

Cute, funny, obnoxious, curious, energetic, dark, short, tall, grumpy, intelligent, shy – these are all words of characterization. Characterization is important for all types of fiction, but it is especially significant for literary fiction. In fact, literary writers are often much more concerned with the depth and complexity of their characters than with the plot and structure of their stories. The best authors create characters that readers care about and root for, characters that make us shiver or cry, characters who are so real that we wonder what they do with the rest of their lives. In “Interpreter of Maladies,” Jhumpa Lahiri brings Mr. Kapasi fully to life, providing not only a physical description of the man but also giving a clear view of his emotions and thoughts.

There are three major techniques necessary for developing a convincing character. First of all, characters must be consistent in their behavior. They cannot be wild and crazy in one scene and then calm and mellow in the next – unless, of course, there is a sufficient reason for that change. Secondly, the character’s words and actions must develop from motivations that the readers can easily comprehend. For example, Mr. Kapasi begins to casually check himself out in his rearview mirror because he believes that Mrs. Das is attracted to him. Lastly, the character must be plausible or lifelike. An authentic character can never be defined by just one trait; rather, a believable character has multiple positive and negative aspects.

Mr. Kapasi first appears as a simple portrait. He is a forty-six-year-old man who has a receding hairline and completely silver hair that greatly stands out due to his rich, “butterscotch complexion" (Lahiri 142). He wears gray trousers and a jacket-style, short-sleeved shirt to match. This physical description provides a clear picture of Mr. Kapasi, but by itself this does not create a convincing character. Fortunately, indirect presentation shows Mr. Kapasi’s words, thoughts, and actions and thus develops Mr. Kapasi into a more complex character.

Considering the techniques for characterization, Mr. Kapasi is clearly a consistent character in several ways. Throughout the story, Mr. Kapasi is an observer. He is always “watching,” “noticing,” and “hearing.” With the Das family, Mr. Kapasi notices all their ages, observes Mrs. Das’ attire in detail, and notes the slight difference of complexion in one boy’s face compared to his brother and sister. Although these little observations show that he is always watching the world around him with interest, Mr. Kapasi is not an active participant in that world. Mr. Kapasi is a dreamer. He has continuous thoughts going on in his head. In fact, it seems he appreciates his inner life more than his outer life. When Mr. Kapasi thinks about his job as an interpreter, he feels “the job was a sign of his failings” (Lahiri 147) because he had dreamed of being an interpreter for “diplomats and dignitaries, resolving conflicts between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could understand both sides” ( Lahiri 147). Caught up in his imagined career, he fails to see the real value in the work he is actually doing. Another example of Mr. Kapasi getting lost in his dreams is his imagined relationship with Mrs. Das. After Mrs. Das comments that Mr. Kapasi’s job is “romantic” and later asks for his address, Mr. Kapasi gets the crazy idea in his head that an affair is going to arise between them. Pathetically, Mr. Kapasi even calculates when he will receive his first letter from Mrs. Das: “A week to settle in, a week to develop pictures, a few days to compose her letter, two weeks to get to India by air…He would hear from Mrs. Das in approximately six weeks’ time” (Lahiri 153). What Mr. Kapasi fails to realize until the end of the story is that, in reality, Mrs. Das has little interest in anyone but herself and certainly no interest in him at all.

The second technique that makes Mr. Kapasi a convincing character is to provide clear motivation for his actions and words. At first, Mr. Kapasi is polite and helpful; he observes the world around him while staying somewhat apart from it. Mr. Kapasi’s actions change when he believes Mrs. Das is attracted to him. He plans to keep the family occupied and tries to keep conversation rolling between him and Mrs. Das – he feels “anxious to be alone with her” ( Lahiri 152). Unlike his wife, Mr. Kapasi believes that Mrs. Das admires his job and is interested in everything he tells her. Finally feeling that he is important and appreciated, Mr. Kapasi is motivated to nervously pursue the affair. Another example of understandable character motivation is Mr. Kapasi’s choice of careers. Mr. Kapasi believes he has taken on the jobs of tour guide and medical interpreter for the obvious reason that his family needs the money. But the reader can see that, in reality, those careers also suit his personality. Mr. Kapasi likes to gain knowledge, he is helpful, and he is good at being an outside observer. As a tour guide, Mr. Kapasi has learned a great deal about the historical sites and native wildlife; he shares that information with others; and, though he is with the tourists, he is usually apart from them as well. As a medical office interpreter, again Mr. Kapasi has gained knowledge and he uses that knowledge to help both the patients and the doctor, but he is an outsider to the main interaction.

The last characterization technique is to make Mr. Kapasi plausible and lifelike. Characters are unconvincing if they are not relatable or if they are one-dimensional. Mr. Kapasi’s personality is very appealing – he is polite, kind, honest, and is interested in the people around him. However, Mr. Kapasi also reveals a darker side as can be seen when he considers the possibility of pursuing an affair between him and Mrs. Das. Not only is she married, but he is married too. Mr. Kapasi gives no thought to the other people who would be hurt if such a relationship developed because he is caught up in an idealized fantasy. This ties into Mr. Kapasi’s greatest flaw – too often he is an “observer” of his own life. Mr. Kapasi cannot appreciate the life he has. He needs someone else to tell him that his life is worthwhile or that he has accomplished something of value. For example, his negative opinion about his job is largely based on his wife’s opinions, not his own: “Mr. Kapasi knew that his wife had little regard for his career as an interpreter…she never asked him about the patients who came to the doctor’s office” (Lahiri 148). He takes a new look at that job when Mrs. Das’ interest in it “reminded him of his intellectual challenges” (Lahiri 148). Her approval makes him feel valued and appreciated. Over the course of the story, Lahiri skillfully reveals Mr. Kapasi’s many qualities, some positive and some negative, making his character three-dimensional.

“Interpreter of Maladies” is clearly a literary fiction short story – though little happens in the plot, the characters are interesting and well defined. The main characters gradually become familiar, inside and out. Mr. Kapasi, in particular, is appealing and lifelike. However, each character’s true identity is not just laid out; so, “interpret” the characters’ personalities through their actions, words, thoughts, and emotions.

Works Cited

Lahiri, Jumpa. “Interpreter of Maladies.” Perrine’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense. Ed. Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson. Ninth edition. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2006. 141-159.